

## Founding Benefactors of the National Gallery of Art

*The portraits hanging in this room depict nine individuals, representing five families, whose generous contributions to the National Gallery of Art earned them the title of Founding Benefactors. Each of these founders presented a private collection that could have constituted a museum in itself. Their combined donations established a precedent for giving to the nation that continues today—a half-century after the Gallery opened in 1941.*

*The portraits of the Founding Benefactors reveal widely varying tastes in formal portraiture during the twentieth century. The paintings are listed in the order of the sitters' principal gifts or bequests, demonstrating a history of the National Gallery's development.*

### **Andrew W. Mellon, dated 1933** **by Sir Oswald Birley** **British, 1880–1952**

Oil on canvas, 1.334 x 1.054 m (52 1/2 x 41 1/2 in.)  
Gift of Mrs. Mellon Bruce 1941.9.1



The place of honor over this room's mantelpiece is given to the founder of the National Gallery of Art, Andrew William Mellon (1855–1937). Having entered his Pittsburgh family's banking business at age nineteen, Mellon became a highly successful financier and industrialist. He served as Secretary of the Treasury from 1921 to 1932 in the cabinets of Presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover and then acted as ambassador to Great Britain in 1932–1933.

Although Mellon had bought works of art while living in Pittsburgh, he began collecting more ambitiously after coming to Washington in 1921. His most spectacular purchases occurred in 1930–1931, when he acquired twenty-one paintings from the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia. These included rare works by Jan van Eyck, Botticelli, and Titian, as well as two Raphaels, four Anthony van Dycks, and five Rembrandts. In 1936 he acquired forty-two pictures and sculpture in a single transaction with a major art dealer. Shortly thereafter, he offered his collection and a museum building to the nation.

Comprising 121 paintings and twenty-one works of sculpture, Mellon's assemblage was superb. To ensure that the museum he founded would include works of the highest caliber, Mellon proposed, and Congress then stipulated, that no work should ever be added to the Gallery "unless it be of a similar high standard of quality." Soon after construction of the National Gallery began, Andrew Mellon died on 26 August 1937.

Sir Oswald Hornby Joseph Birley, knighted in 1949, posed Mellon at work beside his desk in a traditional seated format that began during the early 1500s.

### **Samuel Henry Kress, dated 1953** **by Leopold Seyffert** **American, 1887–1956**

Oil on canvas, 1.273 x 1.022 m (50 1/8 x 40 1/4 in.)  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1953.2.3

Originally a Pennsylvania schoolteacher, Samuel Kress (1863–1955) opened a stationery and notions shop in 1887, which grew to a nationwide chain, S. H. Kress & Company. His art collecting, which started when he was in his fifties, emphasized painting and sculpture from Italy. In 1929 he established the Kress Foundation to sponsor traveling exhibitions, scholarships in art history, and restorations of monuments in Italy. Abandoning plans to open his own museum of Italian Renaissance art, Samuel Kress was the first to donate his collection in response to Andrew Mellon's call for

contributions to create a national art museum. For the Gallery's opening, Kress gave 393 Italian paintings and sculpture, ranging from the 1200s through the 1700s.

### **Rush Harrison Kress, dated 1953** **by Leopold Seyffert** **American, 1887–1956**

Oil on canvas, 1.270 x 1.022 m (50 x 40 1/4 in.)  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.93

After illness incapacitated his older brother, Samuel Kress, in 1946, Rush Kress (1877–1963) took over leadership of the family's cultural foundation. The younger Kress expanded the collection from its largely Italian focus, adding masterpieces by such painters as Dürer, Grünewald, El Greco, Rubens, Watteau, and Ingres. He also acquired one of the world's great assemblages of Renaissance bronzes—some 1,300 statuettes, plaquettes, and medals amassed over the years by a discerning European scholar. In addition to its gifts to the Gallery, the Kress Foundation distributed selections of key works to eighteen city museums and twenty-three universities throughout the nation.

Leopold Gould Seyffert depicted both Kress brothers seated in arm-chairs of Italian Renaissance style, indicative of their artistic interests.

### **Peter A. B. Widener, dated 1902** **by John Singer Sargent** **American, 1856–1925**

Oil on canvas, 1.489 x 0.984 m (58 5/8 x 38 3/4 in.)  
Widener Collection 1942.9.101

During the Civil War, Peter Arrell Brown Widener (1834–1915) was a tradesman who supplied meat to the Union Army near Philadelphia. Following the war, he successfully invested his profits in trolley cars and public transit systems. He collected in the princely tradition; antique furniture, tapestries, and decorative arts created a palatial setting for his Old Master paintings and sculpture. Widener also set an important precedent for other American collectors by acquiring the works of Edouard Manet and Auguste Renoir when these artists were still considered daringly avant-garde. P. A. B. Widener left the family collection in trust to his son, Joseph, for eventual donation to a public museum.

John Singer Sargent, an American artist who was a cosmopolitan celebrity, painted this shadowed, sober portrait of Peter A. B. Widener in London. Other canvases by Sargent usually hang in Galleries 69 and 70.

### **Joseph E. Widener, dated 1921** **by Augustus John** **British, 1878–1961**

Oil on canvas, 1.247 x 1.023 m (49 1/8 x 40 1/4 in.)  
Widener Collection 1942.9.100

After the death of his father, Peter, in 1915, Joseph Early

Widener (1872–1943) permitted visitors to view the family collection in their mansion outside Philadelphia. Joseph not only added appreciably to the collection but also enhanced its quality by culling works of secondary importance. Andrew Mellon had discussed the possibility of a national museum with Joseph Widener, who offered in 1939 to donate his family collection to the Gallery in memory of his father. The Widener gift was announced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the Gallery’s opening ceremony, along with the donation from the Kress Foundation. By 1942, only a year and a half after the museum’s inauguration, the Wideners’ works were installed in the Gallery.

The Welsh artist Augustus Edwin John used an expressionist style that enlivens Joseph Widener’s portrait with a flickering, abstracted setting.

*Lessing J. Rosenwald*, dated 1955  
by Gardner Cox  
American, 1906–1988

Oil on canvas, 1.146 x 0.886 m (45 1/8 x 34 13/16 in.)  
Gift of Lessing J. Rosenwald 1955.8.1

Lessing Julius Rosenwald (1891–1979) followed his father in directing the mail-order firm of Sears, Roebuck & Company. In 1939 he retired from business to devote himself to public service and to his love of prints and drawings from the Middle Ages to the present. In 1941, only months after the National Gallery opened, Rosenwald began donating selections from his collection of works on paper. He also freely lent graphic arts from his home outside Philadelphia for public exhibition or scholarly inspection in Washington. By the time of Rosenwald’s death, his gifts to the Gallery totaled some 22,000 drawings and prints. He donated his rare illustrated books and manuscripts to the Library of Congress.

Gardner Cox achieved fame for the sound draftsmanship and understanding of anatomy that underlie Rosenwald’s apparently casual likeness.

*Chester Dale*, 1922  
by George Bellows  
American, 1882–1925

Oil on canvas, 1.137 x 0.883 m (44 3/4 x 34 3/4 in.)  
Chester Dale Collection 1944.16.1

Chester Dale (1883–1962) began as a runner at the New York Stock Exchange at age fifteen. He eventually owned railroad assets as well as utilities and municipal bonds in the United States and Canada. At twenty-seven, he married a critic and painter who introduced him to the collecting of modern art. For the Gallery’s opening, Dale lent twenty-two American pictures and, a few months later, two rooms of French impressionist paintings. His loans increased substantially over time. Dale’s bequest transferred his collection, including these long-term loans, to the Gallery. Virtually every major artist who worked in Paris from the mid-1800s to mid-1900s is represented—from Corot and Monet through Matisse and Picasso.

At the suggestion of his friend the painter George Bellows, Chester Dale posed holding a golf club; as youths, both artist and sitter had been semiprofessional athletes. More paintings by Bellows, including his famous boxing scenes, normally hang in Gallery 71.

*Ailsa Mellon Bruce*, dated 1926  
by Philip de László  
British, 1869–1937

Oil on canvas, 1.222 x 0.966 m (48 1/8 x 38 in.)  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.20.1

Ailsa Mellon Bruce (1901–1969), daughter of Andrew Mellon, acted as her father’s hostess in Washington and when he was ambassador to Great Britain. In 1926 she married David K. E. Bruce, who became a distinguished diplomat and also served as the National Gallery’s president from 1939 to 1945. Mrs. Mellon Bruce established the Avalon Foundation in 1940, which, among other things, funded the Gallery’s Andrew W. Mellon Lectures in

the Fine Arts. In 1946 she designated funds for the Gallery’s purchase of American art and later made possible the acquisition of many Old Masters, such as *Ginevra de’ Benci*, the only painting by Leonardo da Vinci that is outside Europe. Along with her brother, Paul, she contributed the large initial gift to finance the new East Building, but she did not live to see its groundbreaking. Mrs. Mellon Bruce’s bequest to the Gallery included an endowment fund and her own exquisite collection of small paintings by the French impressionists.

The Hungarian-born painter Philip Alexius László de Lombos gained international acclaim for just such fashionable images as Ailsa Mellon Bruce’s elegant portrait, done in the year of her wedding.

*Paul Mellon*, dated 1974  
by William F. Draper  
American, born 1912

Oil on canvas, 1.225 x 1.019 m (48 1/4 x 40 1/8 in.)  
Paul Mellon Collection 1983.75.1

Son of the National Gallery’s founder and the brother of Ailsa Mellon Bruce, Paul Mellon (born 1907) became the first president of the Gallery’s Board of Trustees in 1938–1939 following Andrew Mellon’s death. Paul Mellon served again in this position from 1963 to 1978, and it was during this time that he oversaw the conception and construction of the East Building, for which he provided a major part of the funding. An avid horseman, Mellon developed an interest in English sporting pictures, which led him to collect British art more widely. Mellon and his wife are also devoted collectors of American and French art. Their extensive donations to the Gallery include masterpieces of European painting, 351 scenes of American Indian life by George Catlin, and seventeen wax statuettes of dancers and bathers by Edgar Degas. Many more of their generous gifts were made in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the National Gallery of Art in 1991.

A Navy combat artist during World War II and later a successful portrait painter, William Franklin Draper animated his portrayal of Paul Mellon with rapid, slashing strokes of the brush.

*The Formation of the National Gallery of Art*  
*Early Sketch for the National Gallery of Art*,  
dated 12 February 1936  
Architect: John Russell Pope  
American, 1874–1937

*Not on display.* Photograph: Gallery Archives, National Gallery of Art



On Christmas Day 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt received a letter from Andrew Mellon offering to give his art collection to establish a national gallery. The proposal included endowment funds and plans for a museum building that he would erect. The press hailed Mellon’s offer as historic. Some commentators called it the greatest gift ever known to have been made to any government by any individual.

Mellon requested that the institution not be named after him but, instead, be called the National Gallery of Art. The act of Congress that created the Gallery on 24 March 1937 provided that the American government would protect and care for the art as well as open the museum to the public free of charge.

The National Gallery’s collections, however, have been formed entirely by private donations. Unique among the world’s national art museums, the Gallery uses no government funds for acquisitions. In addition to the Founding Benefactors who answered Andrew Mellon’s call for gifts, thousands of other philanthropists have presented works of art or discretionary funds since the National Gallery opened on 17 March 1941.

**The portraits discussed in this sheet normally hang in this room, but installations may change.** PLEASE RETURN THIS GUIDE TO ITS BOX.  
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